



**Jackson County Board of Commissioners
Work Session
February 17, 2015**

Agenda Item: Former Drexel Property Plans

Presenter: Gerald Green

The former Drexel property located in Whittier represents an opportunity for Jackson County, as well as Swain County and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians. The approximately 27 acre site, which contains an 82,000 SF building, has been unused for over 4 years. Reuse of the site was made challenging by the identification of the entire property as floodway in the 2010 FEMA Flood Maps. New construction and other activities are prohibited or severely limited by this designation, limiting the opportunities for redevelopment of the property. Vandals were entering the property and removing metal and other items. As a result, the property had become a detriment to the community and a liability for the County.

In mid-2013, a small group of interested persons representing County and regional agencies was convened to discuss potential uses of the property. At this meeting, the potential of the property serving multi-county agricultural needs was identified. The group expanded and became the steering committee that guided efforts to identify options for reuse of the property. Steering committee members are:

Gerald Green, Chair

Rob Hawk

Rich Price

Lynn Sprague

Sarah Graham

Debra Sloan

Charlie Myers

Rusty Ellis

Brad Stillwell

Barry Stevens

Discussion progressed and the name Smoky Mountain Agricultural Development Station (SMADS) was coined for the initial project. As the discussion continued, broader community needs, including recreation and economic development, were identified. In light of the broader range of needs and the potential of the property to meet these needs, a new name is being solicited.

As various ideas were generated for reuse of the property, it became apparent that a property master plan was needed to assure the proposed uses were compatible and to solicit ideas from the community. Concerns regarding hazardous materials that could have been used in past manufacturing processes led to the realization that an environmental assessment would be necessary. Funds to pay for the master planning effort and the preparation of a Phase 1 environmental assessment were generated through the sale of scrap metal from the site, coordinated and managed by the Jackson County Planning Department, and a grant from the

Southwest Planning Commission, applied for by the Planning Department. With these funds, an RFP was issued for the preparation of a master plan for the site and a Phase 1 assessment. Altamont Environmental was selected to undertake this effort. The Phase 1 Environmental Assessment identified no environmental hazards that would limit the use of the site. Two community meetings were held at Smoky Mountain Elementary School to solicit community input and ideas during the planning process. The desires of the community as identified in the community meetings are:

- Agricultural activities and events
- Recreational facilities
- Business development
- Event/activity center

During the master planning process, areas that had been designated as being archeologically significant were identified on the property. It was determined that these areas should be preserved and recognized. As the preparation of the property master plan continued it was realized that the desired uses could coexist with the preservation of the archeological sites if located and managed properly. The property master plan lists the potential uses of the property, identifies locations for the uses, and recommends next steps. The master plan will be presented to the community for comment at a community meeting scheduled for March 3 at Smoky Mountain Elementary School.

Next steps identified in the master plan include the assessment of the condition of the building, developing outdoor recreational facilities, providing for initial agricultural uses, and preserving and recognizing the archeological areas. Each of these is detailed below:

- Building assessment – the existing building is approximately 50 years old, has some roof leaks, and is in need of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing system upgrades. While it appears to be structurally sound, an analysis of its structural integrity is needed. An assessment of the building is needed to determine if it is more economical to renovate the existing building or to construct new building(s) to provide the desired facilities. The cost for a building assessment is approximately \$10,000.
- Outdoor recreational areas – a walking trail around the property is the top priority item, with the potential for a community garden. The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina has expressed interest in funding these improvements.
- Agricultural uses – a cattle loading facility, which would enable farmers to bring their cattle to the Drexel site, weigh them, and load them onto a large trailer for the trip to a larger regional facility for sale, has been identified as the first agricultural project at the site. The estimated cost of the facility is \$60,000 and the Community Foundation has expressed an interest in funding this also.
- Archeological area preservation – the entire property has been identified as archeologically significant, with an area of the property identified as a priority archeological site. The preservation of the priority archeological area has been incorporated into the master plan. A more detailed strategy for preserving and recognizing the archeological features of the property is needed. The Cherokee Preservation Foundation has expressed an interest in funding the development of this strategy, and possibly its implementation.

The input of the Board of Commissioners regarding the master plan and the potential uses of the former Drexel site, and direction for the next steps is requested. The initial item on which direction from the Commissioners is requested is whether to undertake the building assessment, using monies in the County's economic development fund. The completion of this assessment and the findings resulting from it will provide information needed to determine the next steps.